

Illinois Wesleyan University

Jackie Owensby
Oregon High School, Oregon
Teacher: Sara Werckle

Illinois Wesleyan University is located in Bloomington, Illinois. The state legislature approved its charter and thirty men founded the University in 1850. Twelve were ministers and eighteen were laymen. The first classes were held in the mornings at the Methodist Episcopal Church that was built in 1836. All students were male and they boarded with good families on reasonable terms. The second year of the school was held in the basement of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The first students that had attended the school had received a copy of the birth certificate. Thirty men from the community signed the document that stated: “[they] do and hereby have associated ourselves together as Trustees and a body corporate for the purpose of permanently establishing at or near said city of Bloomington. . . an Institution of learning of Collegiate grade in accordance with the provisions of an act of the General Assembly of the State of Illinois. . . And we do hereby make known and declare that the said Institution of learning hereby established shall be known in law and equity or otherwise by the name and style of Illinois Wesleyan University.” James F. Jaquess named the school Illinois University. Later “Wesleyan” was added due to the forthcoming Methodist Episcopal patronage.

They then developed a school. But where would it be located and how would it be paid for? They had several proposals on where to locate the university. Franklin Kelsey Phoenix offered to sell eight and a half to ten acres to the north of Bloomington for \$2,000 with a donation of \$1,000. Three people had agreed to pay \$500 each if they had chosen Phoenix’s site. The site lacked the features that the Board of Trustees

wanted. Phoenix's site was turned down and the trustees looked at the area in which the university is presently located. The trustees had begun to build the Old North building, but soon they had to figure out how they were going to fund the construction and keep the university going. In 1851 they had seen a picture by an artist named Hunt. It was a "magnificent painting on which Hunt has spent a vast amount of labor," according to a newspaper account. They had raised a total of \$28 that went to the university. Hunt was the youngest founder and was an agent for the university. He traveled through central Illinois looking for financial support. In the spring of 1852 the Western Whig reported that he had \$15,000 before he had gone to the East Coast. When the year ended he had a grand total of almost \$17,000. Most of these funds went to building the school.

Several people have walked through the halls and classrooms of that school. Some were little known and others were known to the whole country. Some of the really important people to the school were the Munsell Brothers. The university would not be there without them. When the brothers came to the university it was \$9,853 in debt and the building was half finished. Oliver Munsell was elected president of the university in 1857. He had made an agreement with the Board of Trustees for a three year contract that would allow him to run the university at his expense. The university gave the financial problems to Munsell to handle. Oliver's brother Charles W. C. had also come to join the ministry in 1846. He became a trustee and a financial agent in 1856. He had plans to pay off the \$75,000 debt, to build new buildings, and to create an endowment for the university. When Oliver's contract was up, he gave the financial management back to the Board of Trustees and they agreed to carefully watch expenses.

Another person of great importance was John Wesley Powell. He was an explorer and a geologist. He became part of the administration in 1865. He was the first professor in the United States to use field work in teaching science. He took a group of students to the Colorado Mountains for some more in-depth studies. He was also the first to do an extensive study of this kind.

Adlai Ewing Stevenson was also one of the earliest students at the university. He came to the university at seventeen, was there for a year or two, and went to Centre College in Kentucky. He later became Vice President of the United States.

Illinois Wesleyan University has flourished over the years. It has been made of many different schools and classes. The School of Art was organized in 1946, the School of Drama, renamed School of Theatre Arts, was established in 1947, the School of Fine Arts was established in 1948 and the School of Nursing was founded in 1959. These examples illustrate the school's offerings. Conditions were difficult at first, but in the end the school rose above the problems that it faced. Many students have walked out of the school and pursued their dreams. People like William G. Mitchell, Phillip White, Edward B. Rust, Akito Mizuno, and others have been business leaders. People like Roger Roloff, Zelotes Edmund Toliver, Susan Quittmeyer-Morris, Dawn Upshaw, and more became opera singers. Due to the University's interests these students and more became what they wanted to be. [From Edward B. Fiske, "Illinois Wesleyan University," The Fiske Guide to Colleges; Illinois Wesleyan University, www.iwu.edu (Oct. 3, 2005); Minor Myers, Jr., and Carl Teichman, Illinois Wesleyan University; student historian's interview with Carl Teichman (Illinois Wesleyan historian), Oct. 3 and 7, 2005.]